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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000623

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SUBJECT: FORMER PRESIDENT ABDALLAHI - "I UNDERESTIMATED THE  
RESISTANCE TO CHANGE IN MAURITANIA"

Classified By: CDA Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) A Man Content With Himself: Charge met with former President Abdallahi on September 24 at his simple home in the village of Lemden (three hours southeast of Nouakchott). This was the first meeting with Abdallahi since he resigned his office on June 24 as his part of the Dakar Accords. Abdallahi was in very good health and spirits. He lives with his daughter and middle son and no longer has any staff. Gone are the Mauritanian security agents who guarded/monitored him prior to his resignation. Abdallahi has only rare visitors now and most of them are people asking for a handout "because they think all ex-presidents are rich." Abdallahi gives them a meal and a warm conversation, but then must send them on their way. The former president is happy in Lemden having spent only half a day at his house in Nouakchott -- where his wife normally stays. Abdallahi told the Charge he is content with his life and proud both of his record as president and of his resistance to the coup which, at minimum, forced the military to allow him to regain his presidential powers (although momentarily) and allow for a constitutional change of government. Abdallahi has no future political ambitions although he sees his daughter and eldest son perhaps pursuing a political career in the future. His only personal lament is that his children will likely be cut off from employment opportunities in Mauritania for the immediate future.

¶2. (C) Similar Views To U.S. on Election: Unlike most of the Mauritanian opposition leaders, the former president accepted the July 18 elections albeit with disappointment. "We had reasonably credible elections and now the opposition has to adjust to a new reality." When Charge reminded Abdallahi of a conversation they had nearly a year ago in which the former president opined that the era of traditional tribal and elite politics were over, Abdallahi said he had, "underestimated the resistance to change in Mauritania." Despite Aziz' control of the mechanisms of power right up to the elections, Abdallahi resigned himself to the fact that the majority of Mauritians chose the traditional and "safe" option of supporting whoever is in power rather than voting for what was better for democracy. Having sent his elder children to campaign on behalf of FNDD candidate Messaoud ould Boulkheir, Abdallahi also said he had, "underestimated the importance of money in Mauritanian politics." He noted despondently that, "invariably conversations with local or tribal leaders came down to one question -- 'What will your candidate give me?' -- and nothing more."

13. (C) Less Harsh On Aziz: Abdallahi was consistently respectful of Aziz referring to him only as "the President" or "President Aziz" and never as "the General." Where he had been fiercely critical of Aziz in the past, he now showed some understanding of the huge challenges the new president faces in view of floods, limited financial resources, severe electrical shortages in the capital, and a weak economic situation. He said, "I am not encouraged by what I see, but I will have to allow the President some time before I dismiss him entirely." Where he was most critical of Aziz was in the new President's populist penchant for making promises he can't keep. Abdallahi noted his advisors always cautioned him not to say the truth about harsh economic realities, but he had always insisted on being straight forward. Having faced food riots himself as president, Abdallahi predicted mass public discontent soon as it becomes evident that Aziz' promises prove empty.

14. (C) More Harsh On The Opposition: Abdallahi chided the opposition for not being able to get past the election loss. He laughed off the "chemically altered ballot" theory put forward by Ahmed Ould Daddah as reflective of a man "who has done a great disservice to Mauritanian democracy." Abdallahi said, "Ould Daddah was never able to accept my election victory and did everything he could to destabilize my government. He encouraged and supported the coup and only turned against the military when he saw they wouldn't organize elections to his liking." He praised the FNDD for having built one of the few real political coalitions in Mauritanian history, but he worried that coalition -- without a common objective -- will wither away. "There are a few

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very good people in the FNDD," but others he saw as allies of convenience. The former president hoped the FNDD would retain some of its unity to build an effective parliamentary opposition. He agreed with Charge that the opposition should find a way to hold the Aziz government to a high standard but not try to block action. Indicative of his increasing distance from politics Abdallahi noted he had not spoken to Ould Boulkheir since the elections (Comment: Personal relations between the two were never warm. End Comment).

15. (C) Mixed on the International Community: Abdallahi shared some of the displeasure of the opposition with the international community during the Dakar Accords saying, "you were fixated on a date (for the election) but never gave us a rational reason why even a delay of two weeks was not possible." He also said, "The oversight promised during the transition period never materialized." Despite his reservations, he did not seem to believe the end result would have been any different as long as Aziz was allowed to run. Abdallahi warmly praised the U.S. through both the Bush and Obama Administrations saying, "You were the only country that really seemed committed to supporting our democratic experiment after I was elected and the only country to maintain a clear and principled stance after the coup." Despite his disappointment with the election results, Abdallahi said, "Mauritanians will always remember what you did for us. They know now they can trust the U.S. to do the right thing." As always, Abdallahi remained confused about the French. He was convinced that President Sarkozy had truly supported Mauritanian democracy, but he saw over his time in office that other French influences took over. He asked rhetorically, "Do you think the French turned on me because I decided to work closely with the United States?"

16. (C) Time Will Tell: Abdallahi said he did not share the hopes of many opposition leaders that another coup will soon displace Aziz, "One can never wish bad for ones own country," but he was not optimistic Aziz would be able to establish political harmony or get the economy moving. He saw that the eventual long-term results of the Dakar Accords would mean, "Either the international community helped us Mauritanians find a consensual exit to a political crisis, or the international community legitimized a coup." He lamented

that the "Mauritanian model" no longer refers to the post-2007 hopes of a democratic example for the Arab world, but instead refers to how a coup leader can find legitimacy. Already he had heard of coup leaders in Honduras and Conakry demanding to be legitimized just as Aziz had.

HANKINS